

Hamburger's At Dawn: Why Trump's South Korea Meeting Matters

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The idea of US President Donald Trump [chowing down hamburgers](#) with the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim Jong-un, and Republic of Korea (ROK) President Moon Jae-in may, I admit, seem a little surreal but, if the next two days of Moon's first meeting with Trump go well, it is not entirely beyond the realms of belief.

Whilst one-to-one statesman-to-statesman meetings are often overhyped, with much of the wrangling over policy being undertaken by officials behind the scenes in the months before, some tête à têtes really are important. Summits between world leaders are not necessarily a success purely based on the policies discussed, the bilateral relations agreed, or [‘the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you have ever seen’](#) being served. No, sometimes it all just comes down to that old intangible: chemistry.

In advance of the Trump-Moon summit, commentators have suggested that the two presidents may face significant challenges on this point due to their distinct personalities (*The Financial Times* calls the South Korean president ‘reserved’, and his US counterpart ‘bombastic’). It's been argued that their very different politics and styles of diplomacy may only serve to exacerbate these difficulties, with *Newsweek* speculating that these disagreements ‘could hamper any hopes of an effective North Korea policy’.

There is a lot riding on this visit. Against the backdrop of the increasing threat to global security posed by the DPRK's nuclear program, this meeting of the two newly elected presidents may very well determine the course of the next four to five years of the international community's stance towards Kim Jong-un's regime at a time when [its nuclear capabilities and ambitions appear to be rapidly advancing](#).

It is true that there are clear differences between Trump and Moon. There is also a potential minefield of other policies over which the US and ROK could (rhetorically at

least) come to blows. On a free trade deal between the two countries, President Trump, has signalled that he will be seeking a renegotiation or termination, deeming it 'unacceptable'. On the subject of the THAAD missile defence system, [Trump has called for ROK to foot the bill](#). Following Moon's decision to pause the rollout of the billion dollar program, tensions over the idling equipment may be more acutely felt than ever.

Despite initial appearances however, the two surprisingly have a lot in common, particularly on the subject of a nuclear DPRK. Both Trump and Moon have said that they would meet with Kim Jong-un. In May, Trump told [Bloomberg](#): 'If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him, I would absolutely -- I would be honored to do it.' He reiterated his comments at [a rally in Atlanta](#) in June, arguing 'What the hell is wrong with speaking? And you know what? It's called opening a dialogue. It's opening a dialogue', going on to paint that rather bizarre image of world leaders eating hamburgers around the conference table. Moon is keen to talk things through also, confirming in an [interview with CBS](#) last week that he believes 'dialogue is necessary'. He has additionally said that he is willing to 'sit knee to knee' with the North Korean leader, and even suggested [a joint bid for the 2030 World Cup](#). The old adage goes that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, and both presidents appear to be willing to open their arms to the DPRK. Moon has said that it is quite possible that this is Kim Jong-un's endgame, and that 'deep inside he is actually yearning or wanting dialogue'. The argument that the DPRK may have had enough of the 'bad cop' and be ready for the 'good cop' is an intriguing one. As Moon notes in calling for the new approach, the international community has completely failed to reign in DPRK's nuclear ambitions with 'only the sanctions and pressure'.

Even on subjects where there might be discord between the US and the ROK, contrary to the common depiction of Trump as stubborn and bullish, he has been shown to be persuaded by other world leaders to see their perspectives. Following a successful meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, for example, Trump left with a very different view to the one he had going in to the talks- and indeed

throughout his entire campaign. He told *The Wall Street Journal* '[a]fter listening for 10 minutes, I realised it's not so easy... I felt pretty strongly that they had a tremendous power over North Korea. But it's not what you would think.'

Moon is wasting no time in highlighting the objectives that he shares with Trump, including 'resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and building peace and security in northeast Asia.' He has also stated that his views are 'not at odds with the policy of the United States or that of President Trump'. In seeking to find common ground, he notes that they both criticise the approaches taken by previous administrations. [Before his election](#), he also sought to placate US fears by saying that he would 'not act unilaterally to have dialogue with the North without prior consultation with the U.S.'

It cannot be forgotten however that the US President is still relatively new to his role, many senior political appointments at the State Department remain unfilled, and the implementation of his Asia policies (where defined) remain in their infancy. It is also worth noting that during Trump's first six months in office, his views have appeared to change very suddenly at times. Speaking about Kim Jong Un alone, Trump privately called Kim 'a [madman with nuclear weapons](#)' at the beginning of May but just a few days earlier, had told [Reuters](#): '[a]s to whether or not he's rational, I have no opinion on it. I hope he's rational'. He has also referred to DPRK's leader as 'a [pretty smart cookie](#)'. Whether Trump's position on the DPRK has, will, or could change is up for debate. New developments such as another nuclear test could also turn the status quo on its head. [Bloomberg](#) has suggested that the death of US citizen, Otto Warmbier, last week following his release from incarceration in DPRK could make prospects of a dialogical relationship more complex from Trump's perspective. A day after the announcement, [Trump tweeted](#) '[w]hile I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!' [At the inaugural session of the US-China Diplomatic Security Dialogue](#) the following day however, US Secretary Mattis said that 'China continues to work [on] these issues'.

Whilst the US and China both have major roles to play, the ROK has by far the most to lose from DPRK flexing its nuclear muscles in the future. Its citizens would be most at risk due to the ROK's geographical proximity and the technological advances made in both DPRK's short and intermediate range missiles. With this in mind it would seem only natural for the country to lead, if not be intimately involved in the international response. Moon will be seeking to use this meeting to ensure that the ROK is at the forefront of the plan of action, not as he had described [in an interview prior to his election](#), 'spectators' to a US-China strategy. At the launch of [Trump's 'America First' initiative](#), he stated that his 'foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else'. This rhetoric would seem to indicate that if DPRK reaches the stage where the US considers that it poses a very serious and immediate security threat, it will choose to protect itself over the ROK. As [US Secretary of Defense Mattis described earlier this month](#), that could have devastating consequences: 'It will be a war more serious in terms of human suffering than anything we've seen since 1953. It will involve the massive shelling of an ally's capital [Seoul], which is one of the most densely packed cities on earth. It would be a war that fundamentally we don't want...we would win at great cost.'

Moon is right when he says that pulling off peace on the Korean peninsula has the potential to be Trump's '[greatest diplomatic achievement](#)', succeeding where so many others have failed. A friendly relationship between Moon and Trump, and alignment between the US and ROK will be essential in solving the problem of a nuclear North Korea. Over the next two days, the world will be watching the rapport between the presidents closely and hoping that the two hatch a plan that works. White House chefs may however like to wait a little longer before deciding whether to stock up on those hamburgers.